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FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5527
INFO ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS DAMASCUS 003036

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: ASAD: ISRAEL DOES NOT DESIRE PEACE

REF(S): FBIS EUP2001070700109

11. (U) SUMMARY: ACCORDING TO A LENGTHY INTERVIEW WITH GERMAN NEWS MAGAZINE DER SPIEGEL 7/9, SYRIAN PRESIDENT AL-ASAD ACCUSED ISRAELI PM SHARON OF PUSHING THE REGION TOWARDS WAR; ASSERTED THAT SYRIA WANTED PEACE BUT WOULD NOT SHY AWAY FROM WAR IF FORCED INTO IT; AND WAS UNAPOLOGETIC ABOUT SYRIAN SUPPORT FOR HIZBALLAH. ASAD, WHO DEPARTS 7/10 FOR A STATE VISIT TO BERLIN, ALSO OFFERED A TORTURED DEFENSE OF HIS CONTROVERSIAL REMARKS REGARDING JEWS DURING THE POPE'S VISIT TO DAMASCUS LAST MAY. THE INTERVIEW IS PART OF THE SARG'S EFFORT TO BURNISH ASAD'S CREDENTIALS INTERNATIONALLY AND PAVE THE WAY FOR HIS TRIP TO GERMANY. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) HIGHLIGHTS:

-- PM SHARON: "IT'S OBVIOUS THAT SHARON AND HIS GOVERNMENT ARE SEEKING A WAR. THEY WISH TO PLUNGE THE WHOLE REGION INTO CONFLICT."

-- HIZBALLAH: "POLITICALLY AND MORALLY, WE TOTALLY SUPPORT HIZBALLAH AND ITS JUST CAUSE OF REGAINING THOSE TERRITORIES IN LEBANON WHICH ARE STILL UNDER OCCUPATION...SYRIA DOES NOT CONTROL THE ACTIONS OF HIZBALLAH"

-- CONFLICT WITH ISRAEL: "SO LONG AS WE REMAIN COMMITTED TO THE PEACE STRATEGY, WE WILL NOT LET OURSELVES BE DRAWN INTO WAR. BUT NEITHER WILL WE SHY AWAY FROM IT, SHOULD WAR BE FORCED UPON US. MOREOVER, THERE IS A WHOLE RANGE OF THINGS THAT WILL HIT ISRAEL HARDER THAN WAR. WE HAVE ONE OR TWO IN OUR LOCKER."

-- INTIFADA: "ARAFAT HAS NEVER BEEN RESPONSIBLE FOR THE INTIFADA....THE INTIFADA IS NOT THE WORK OF ONE MAN, ONE STATE, OR ONE PARTY, IT IS THE REVOLT OF THE PALESTINIAN PEOPLE."

-- PROSPECTS FOR PEACE WITH ISRAEL: ASAD DENIED THAT SYRIA SUPPORTED A NEW "CALL TO DRIVE THE ISRAELIS INTO THE SEA." "THIS IS NOT OUR REASONING...WE ACCEPT THE REASONING OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY AND SAY, AS YOU DO IN GERMANY [AND] IN THE U.S. THAT ISRAEL MUST HAND BACK THE TERRITORIES IT OCCUPIED IN 1967. THE [HARsher] TONE WE'RE ADOPTING IS IN LINE WITH THE CHANGING CONDITIONS [I.E., CURRENT TENSION IN THE REGION]. IN TERMS OF POLICY, WE STICK BY OUR PRINCIPLES [I.E., NEGOTIATIONS BASED ON MADRID TERMS OF REFERENCE].

-- ANTISEMITIC REMARKS: "WE SYRIANS OPPOSE THE TERM ANTI-SEMITISM...SEMITES ARE A RACE...WE ARE AT ITS CORE...I MERELY COMPARED CHRIST'S AGONIES WITH THE SUFFERINGS OF THE PALESTINIANS." ASKED IF HE HAD MEANT THAT JEWS WERE RESPONSIBLE FOR CHRIST'S AGONIES, ASAD REPLIED THAT "THESE ARE HISTORICAL FACTS WHICH WE CANNOT DENY. BUT HOW CAN ANYONE ATTRIBUTE AN ANTI-JEWISH ATTITUDE TO ME, WHEN WE ALSO HAVE JEWISH CITIZENS HERE IN SYRIA, AND WE AS MUSLIMS RECOGNIZE THE JEWISH RELIGION?"

-- THE ECONOMY: "SYRIA IS STILL A SOCIALIST COUNTRY, BUT WE DO OF COURSE HAVE A VISION FOR THE FUTURE...WE ARE BUILDING DEVELOPMENT POLICY ON TWO PILLARS: CREATING MORE JOBS, AND RAISING STANDARDS OF LIVING. WE WILL CONSIDER ANYTHING THAT HELPS TO ACHIEVE THIS. BUT WE WILL NOT SELL THE STATE SECTOR."

13. (U) COMMENT: ASAD'S PERSONAL ATTACKS AGAINST SHARON AND

HIS THREATS TO RESPOND TO FURTHER ISRAELI STRIKES ARE HARSHER AND MORE EXPLICIT THAN HIS RECENT PUBLIC REMARKS ON THESE ISSUES. THIS PROBABLY REFLECTS THE INCREASING PRESSURE HE FEELS, FROM BOTH DOMESTIC CONSTITUENCIES AND OTHER ARAB LEADERS, TO RESPOND MORE DIRECTLY IF ATTACKED AGAIN. HE IS LIKELY FRUSTRATED THAT THE ANTI-SEMITISM ISSUE HASN'T GONE AWAY AND CONCERNED THAT PROTESTS COULD MAR WHAT HE HOPES WILL BE A SUCCESSFUL TRIP TO BERLIN THIS WEEK. END COMMENT.

PEARCE